United Nations E/2010/NGO/44

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
4 May 2010

Original: English

Substantive session of 2010
New York, 28 June-22 July 2010
Item 2 (c) of the provisional agenda*
Annual ministerial review: implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women

Statement submitted by World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2010/100.

10-34539 (E) 140610

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Statement

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts believes that, by placing the girl child at the centre of all development efforts, families, communities and nations can move out of poverty and towards prosperity. All available evidence indicates that, by ensuring girls and young women are empowered and valued, efforts to implement internationally agreed goals and commitments, including the Millennium Development Goals, are much more likely to succeed.

Nearly half the world's population is under the age of 25, and over 1.2 billion are between the ages of 10 and 19 years old. An estimated 87 per cent of the world's adolescents live in countries affected by poverty, hunger, disease and violence. Girls and young women suffer disproportionately, owing to a lack of ambition and commitment from most countries in their efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and to develop and implement specific gender and youth policies.

Access to education and quality education in particular still has a significant gender bias. Seven in every 10 of the world's hungry are girls and women. Climate change, lack of water and the crisis in fisheries and other natural resources are reducing food security worldwide. As food prices rise, hunger and poverty affect more people, with women and the young most at risk and girls as the last priority. Restrictive cultural practices limit girls' opportunities, constrain their roles in society and put them at risk for illness, injury, neglect and violence. Pandemics such as AIDS and malaria continue to impact more directly on the survival chances of women and girls, and over three million girls a year still suffer the trauma and long-term consequences of female genital mutilation.

Yet we know that girls and young women are the most crucial groups in our communities if we want to ensure opportunities for all and guarantee a sustainable future for humankind. There are more than 600 million girls living in the developing world, and one quarter of the population in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa are girls aged 10 to 24. Transforming the lives of girls and young women is the beginning of a ripple effect. Empowering girls and the women they will become pushes entire families and communities out of poverty and away from hunger. Educated girls and young women earn more money, start their families later and have fewer children. When girls understand their own health and their rights, whole communities are healthier and safer. When girls are free from sexual violence, coercion and destitution, they are free from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. When they are educated about sexual and reproductive health, their children are born healthy. Empowered girls become women who invest in their families and start a process of education and care that breaks the poverty cycle and changes family and community perceptions of girls from being a burden to being valued and worthy. Girls and young women are the hidden potential of a nation's economy and it is time that society and Governments recognize, engage and nurture this potential.

Despite knowing that investment in girls is the most powerful response to many of the dilemmas facing humankind, international progress in implementing and achieving the Millennium Development Goals is appallingly slow and, when directly concerning the girl child, often even slower. Less than half a cent of every

United States dollar spent on international assistance programmes is invested directly in girls.

Through its mission to enable girls and young women to discover their fullest potential as responsible citizens of the world, World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts is already placing the girl child at the centre of the solution. Education and leadership programmes, community action and advocacy campaigns reach out to 10 million girl guides and girl scouts and their communities in 145 countries. In order to rapidly and significantly strengthen and improve national efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals, the organization recommends that the international community, Governments and civil society ensure that the girl child is placed at the centre of all development efforts, including policymaking, budgeting, governance and projects.

To rapidly improve the status of the girl child and unlock her potential, the international community, Governments and civil society need to focus on two areas: girls' empowerment and integration in decision-making at all levels; and education and training, especially on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Girls' empowerment and participation in decision-making at all levels

Discrimination against girls and young women can be based on class, race, ethnicity and age. Barriers include unequal power relations, limited opportunities for education, inadequate access to health care and services, cultural biases and poor economic conditions. As a result, girls and young women are disenfranchised and marginalized. They are subject to violence and abuse. Domestic violence causes more deaths and injuries for girls and young women aged 15 to 44 than malaria, war, traffic accidents and cancer combined.

Girls' empowerment entails a process whereby girls gain more control over their lives, become active and valued members of their communities, and are able to make informed choices about issues that directly affect them. Girls and young women are especially excluded from decision-making processes, an absence that continues into womanhood with, for example, only 17 per cent of parliamentary seats across Africa being held by women.

Inclusion in decision-making and girls' empowerment go hand in hand. When girls and young women have the opportunity to identify the problems that affect their lives and, most importantly, find and implement the solutions, it builds their self-confidence and encourages them to value the positive impact they can have on the lives of others. If citizenship and community action are learned and practiced as girls, the women they become will be compassionate and active citizens.

World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts calls on the international community, national Governments and civil society to empower girls by:

- Providing a safe and supportive environment in which girls and young women can cultivate their own set of values and grow in confidence
- Increasing commitment and action on empowering girls and young women as a priority in policy and budget decisions
- Advocating that the media, including new communications technologies, promote positive images of women and girls

- Involving men and boys in dialogues on gender roles and encouraging positive interaction with women and girls
- Tackling cultural gender discrimination and promoting gender equality

World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts calls on the international community and national Governments to ensure that girls and young women are included in all decision-making processes by:

- Ensuring the right to freedom of expression and access to information for girls and boys on an equal basis
- Ensuring children, particularly girls, have access to decision-making processes at all levels
- Recognizing children, particularly girls, as powerful agents of change in all areas of society
- Building an intergenerational partnership based on mutual trust and respect and the development of shared goals
- Ensuring equal representation of girls in all formal and informal decision-making bodies
- Challenging the role of young men in society so that they take responsibility for their own activities and develop equal relationships with young women

Education and training, especially on sexual reproductive health and rights

Seventy percent of the world's 130 million out-of-school children are girls, and there are 42 million fewer girls than boys in primary school. Girls who miss out on primary education make up two thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate people, and every year of schooling lost represents a 10 to 20 per cent reduction in girls' future incomes.

Cultural and patriarchal family structures tend to prioritize the needs of boys over girls. Economic hardship can mean many parents often co-opt their children, especially girls, as additional labour resources. Other obstacles to girls' education include a shortage of school space, lack of female teachers, long distances to travel, unaffordable fees, cultural norms that reinforce women's traditional roles, and violence.

Social and economic conditions around the world also have a significant impact on the health of girls and young women. Twenty-seven per cent of girls aged 15 to 19 in sub-Saharan Africa are married, and 28 per cent give birth by age 18. Every year, some 14 million adolescent girls give birth. Consequently, pregnancy complications and childbirth are the leading causes of mortality among girls between the ages of 15 and 19.

The AIDS epidemic has a disproportionate impact on women and young girls, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where three women are HIV-infected for every two men. Among young people (15 to 24 years of age), that ratio increases to three young women for every young man.

Sex is still a taboo topic and sexual education remains controversial in many countries. It is often difficult for girls and young women to get accurate and reliable information about sex and sexuality and to be able to talk freely and confidently

about issues they face, including birth control, pregnancy outside of marriage, teenage pregnancy. premarital sex, morality, abstinence and sexually transmitted infections. This all translates into an urgent need for comprehensive sex education, which enables girls and young women to understand their rights and make informed choices about their own lives.

To meet the educational needs of girls and young women, World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts recommends recognizing the role of non-formal education provided by independent youth organizations in education policies, budgets and national frameworks.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition of education includes three distinct types of education: formal; informal; and non-formal, whereby non-formal education is organized educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve an identifiable learning clientele with identifiable learning objectives. Non-formal education makes a significant contribution to the full personal and social development of an individual.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has identified that involvement in girls' organizations over extended periods has a positive impact on girls' civic participation and in counteracting societal pressures.

World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts calls on the international community, national Governments and civil society to ensure girls' free, quality and comprehensive education by:

- Supporting organizations involved in the promotion of the education of girls and young women
- Increasing political commitment to give women's and girls' education higher priority
- Introducing poverty-reduction strategies to ensure that the right to education is the right of every child
- Eliminating gender discrimination, including through the promotion of educational programmes that challenge traditional attitudes of men and boys toward women and girls
- Providing universal access to basic social and education services
- Recognizing non-formal education as a positive method of learning
- Providing girls and young women with appropriate education, information, skills and access to health services and counselling to enable informed and responsible health choices, including non-formal education programmes for the social, personal and sexual development of girls and young women
- Providing young women with opportunities to be involved in the planning, delivering and evaluation of sexual education
- Supporting youth organizations, which provide safe spaces for girls and young women to discuss sex, health and rights free from discrimination.